PRESS RELEASE: Wednesday 12 January 2022

Ecology studies "vital" at bridges threatened with infilling

Campaigners have asked a Minister to commission audits of the ecology around dozens of historic railway bridges before work to infill them is allowed to proceed.

National Highways manages the Historical Railways Estate (HRE) of around 3,100 disused structures on the Department for Transport's behalf. A major works programme at 75 bridges and tunnels was put on hold by Government last summer after a masonry arch at Great Musgrave in Cumbria - which was needed for a link between two heritage railways - was buried in around 1,000 tonnes of aggregate and concrete, prompting widespread criticism.

The state-owned roads company is now establishing a formal procedure for reviewing the type of works to be carried out at its HRE structures. Sustrans, the charity responsible for the National Cycle Network, has appraised the value of the 75 structures for future active travel use, but campaigners believe that the ecological significance of the 'green corridors' passing beneath them is being disregarded and needs to be determined before decisions are made.

The HRE Group - an alliance of engineers, sustainable transport advocates and greenway developers - has asked Baroness Vere, the Minister responsible for the HRE, to commission "an appropriate independent body to undertake local ecology audits of the corridors affected by proposed infilling schemes."

A desktop appraisal carried out by the group suggests that nine of the 59 HRE structures in England where work is currently paused are in Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, one spans a Site of Special Scientific Interest and 20 (34%) are in areas designated on the Priority Habitat Inventory for Deciduous Woodland. Of the 57 bridges across the UK earmarked for full infilling, 38 (67%) appear to span viable wildlife corridors which would therefore be blocked.

"The potential fragmentation of a natural habitat system by the infilling of rail transport infrastructure is likely to be significant", said Dr Niall Burnside, a landscape ecologist.

"Moreover, the great importance of green bridges and other forms of wildlife passage have been documented repeatedly over the last 25 years. This significance is recognised at a European level where the high connectivity importance of disused rail infrastructure - irrespective of its direct biodiversity importance - for migration, dispersal or foraging routes is highlighted.

"A significant amount of literature reports on the conservation value assigned to former railway embankments and, as an example, over 1,000 hectares of lineside land in London have been identified as Sites of Nature Conservation Importance (SNCIs). So, these habitats

offer unique opportunities for increased biodiversity; biodiversity that typically requires, and relies upon, movement and wider landscape connectivity."

A unit within Jacobs, engineering consultants to National Highways' HRE team, undertakes an ecology study at each structure where major works are programmed. Based on one such study, the NH engineer responsible for a bridge at Barcombe, East Sussex - which has been threatened with infilling - told a stakeholder meeting on 18 November that the scheme's ecological impact would be "low". However the route under the bridge is recognised locally as an established wildlife corridor with sensitive habitat.

Hazel Fell Rayner, organiser of the campaign against Barcombe bridge's infilling, said: "Thousands of miles of former railway have been reclaimed by nature in the decades since trains stopped running and many now play essential roles for wildlife transit. We cannot close our eyes to this reality in the midst of a biodiversity crisis.

"It's vital that the wider consequences of each infilling scheme are understood and considered as part of a holistic decision-making process; looking in isolation at direct impacts involving the structure itself is simply not broad enough.

"Infilling typically involves burying a bridge in 1,500-2,000 tonnes of quarried stone and concrete. The carbon footprint of these schemes is enormous compared with sympathetic repairs; the ecological impacts - whilst not so obvious - can have far-reaching consequences for many species and need to be mitigated."

Campaigners have set up an online petition seeking support for ecology audits at the 75 structures currently earmarked for major works. It can be reached via www.change.org/protect-railway-wildlife-corridors

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Attachments

LittleSmeaton©TheHREGroup: Two bridges at Little Smeaton in North Yorkshire are threatened with infilling, blocking the route of the former railway which has been reclaimed by nature since closure in 1959. (Credit: The HRE Group)

Barcombe©TheHREGroup: Local ecology groups regard the route under Barcombe bridge, East Sussex, to be an established wildlife corridor. (Credit: The HRE Group)

CrowsCastle©TheHREGroup: Crows Castle bridge in the Cotswolds Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty spans a Site of Special Scientific Interest. (Credit: The HRE Group)

Welshampton©TheHREGroup: Two in every three bridges proposed for infilling appear to span viable wildlife transit routes, such as this one near Welshampton. (Credit: The HRE Group)

(Higher resolution versions of the above photographs are available on request)

SupportingDocuments(PDF): The HRE Group's letter to Baroness Vere; minutes of the stakeholder meeting about Barcombe bridge

To link to Forgotten Relics' video report about National Highways' infilling and demolition programme or embed it on your webpage:

(Link) https://youtu.be/Y7kltVY7I8Y

(Embed) <iframe width="560" height="315" src="https://www.youtube.com/embed/Y7kltVY7I8Y" title="YouTube video player" frameborder="0" allow="accelerometer; autoplay; clipboard-write; encrypted-media; gyroscope; picture-in-picture" allowfullscreen></iframe>

Contact details

Media enquiries: campaign@thehregroup.org
Twitter: @theHREgroup
Facebook: @theHREgroup

Notes for editors

The Historical Railways Estate (HRE) is owned by the Department for Transport (DfT) and managed on its behalf by National Highways (NH). NH is responsible for inspecting, maintaining and limiting the liability associated with around 3,100 disused railway bridges, abutments, tunnels, culverts and viaducts.

Although transport policy is largely a matter for the devolved administrations, around 19% of the HRE structures are in Scotland and 11% in Wales. These remain under HE's management.

National Highways operates under a Protocol Agreement with the Department for Transport which sets out its obligations in relation to the safety, inspection, maintenance, disposal of the structures, the maximisation of rental income and reduction of risk. Its remit was formerly fulfilled by BRB (Residuary) until its abolition on 30 September 2013.

In 2020, National Highways awarded framework contracts to six companies for works on HRE structures with a headline value of £254M over seven years. It also agreed a professional services contract with Jacobs, worth £31.9M over ten years, and two contracts for inspections/examinations with a value of £18M over ten years.

In January 2021, it was revealed that 134 structures are at risk of demolition or infilling. These are located in East Anglia (12), East Midlands (4), London and the Home Counties (8), Northern England (16), Northern Scotland (8), North-West England (3), South-East England (11), Central/Southern Scotland (19), South-West England (24), Wales (5), West Midlands (16) and Yorkshire & Lincolnshire (8).

National Highways now claims that only 68 structures will be infilled or demolished in the short term, but hundreds remain at risk in the longer term.

A map showing the broader threat to HRE structures - including those that have failed assessments - is available via this link…

https://www.google.com/maps/d/u/0/edit?mid=1LVvKXUS_a66LGzG8mPNLZaRpz2hw3ioe

The HRE Group is an alliance of walking, cycling and heritage campaigners, engineers and greenway developers who regard the Historical Railways Estate's structures to be strategically valuable in the context of future rail and active travel provision.

The following local authorities have told National Highways that planning permission is required for their infilling schemes: Aberdeenshire, Angus, Cheshire West & Chester, Essex, Glasgow, Gloucestershire, Herefordshire, Hertfordshire, Leicestershire, North Ayrshire, North Yorkshire, Northumberland, Perth & Kinross, Powys, Shropshire and Stratford-upon-Avon. Others have raised objections or imposed specific constraints.